

Glen Echo Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Glen Echo Park
is administered by the
George Washington Memorial Parkway

Dentzel Carousel



During Glen Echo's glory days as an amusement park, the Dentzel Carousel was the jewel of the park. An afternoon outing was not complete without a ride on the elaborately decorated carousel. Today, the historic carousel, (one of the country's finest,) is still a highlight of an excursion to Glen Echo Park, now a National Park Service site. From late spring to early fall, visitors of all ages delight in riding the intricately hand carved animals, savoring a piece of history as they go.

Dentzel Carousels

The Glen Echo Park carousel was manufactured by one of the country's foremost carousel builders, the Dentzel Carousel Company. In 1860, young Gustav Dentzel, son of a carousel maker in Germany, came to the United States and founded his company in Philadelphia. His son William Dentzel carried on the family business until 1929.

Dentzel Carousels were known for their realistic, graceful animals and elaborate carvings. Artisans created the Glen Echo carousel using production line methods. They shaped the various parts of the animals' head, legs, and tail and fastened them with glue and dowels to a hollow wooden body. A master carver finished the carvings, making sure that all the parts blended together gracefully. Artisans applied a base coat of white paint and finished the animals with brilliant colors and sometimes even gold leaf. Finally they added a protective coat of varnish.

The Glen Echo carousel is called a "menagerie carousel" because it is made up of many different kinds of animals. The animals stand in three

concentric rings with the "romance" side, the more highly-carved and decorated side facing out, and the "plain" side facing in. The carousel also has two circus chariots. Although there seems to be no beginning or end to the circle of animals, there actually is a lead or "king" horse. Look for the most intricately-carved animal.

More than one thousand lights sparkle from the carousel and are reflected in the mirrors on the rounding board (overhead canopy) and on the inner drum. More examples of Dentzel artistry, such as jesters, cupids, and flowers encircle the plaster rounding board. The panels on the inner drum, which hide the mechanical workings, are painted with decorative scenes.

The Glen Echo carousel is an electric-powered platform model, so the animals ride on a suspended floor. The 48 foot platform tilts slightly inward, like a curve on a highway. When in motion it turns counterclockwise and makes about five revolutions a minute.

The Wurlitzer Organ

The carousel moves to the music of a Wurlitzer band organ, which was installed in 1926 and is a rare attraction in itself. It operates much like a player piano with perforated paper rolls. From the 256 wooden pipes flow the sounds of an orchestra with

viola, bass, saxophone, trumpet, trombone, violin, flute, flageolet, and piccolo. The organ also has a glockenspiel, castanets, a cymbal, and snare and bass drums. Only 12 Wurlitzer organs of this style are known to exist.

Endangered Species

When the popularity of urban amusement parks declined in the 1960s, many carousels were dismantled and sold piece by piece to collectors. Rescued from this fate by a group of local citizens in 1970, the Dentzel carousel at Glen Echo Park is one of about 155 functioning antique carousels in the country and one of the few that is still in its original location.

Protecting this rare treasure from wear and tear while still operating it for the public’s enjoyment takes special care. Crafts people and Park staff constantly repair and maintain the complex machinery, the band organ, and the canopy building that houses the carousel. In the mid-1980s, restoration workers began the time-consuming process of returning the carousel and its animals to their original brilliant appearance. The restoration work was completely funded by donations from carousel riders and other private citizens.

Saving a Local Treasure

Visitors to Glen Echo can enjoy the park and the Dentzel carousel today because of a remarkable public effort. At the end of the 1968 season, Glen Echo Amusement Park’s owners announced that the park would close. To prevent further development of the area along the scenic Potomac River palisades, the federal government acquired the site in April 1970 and later placed it under the care of the National Park Service. The community rallied to support the acquisition. In just one month during the same year,

local residents mounted an aggressive campaign that raised \$80,000 in private funds to buy the carousel from a collector who had purchased it after the amusement park closed. An additional \$10,000 ensured the return of the Wurlitzer organ. The carousel and organ were donated to the National Park Service with the understanding that they would remain at Glen Echo Park and be operated for the public’s enjoyment.

Restoring the Carousel



Restorer Rosa Ragan applies gold leaf during the restoration process.

As carousels began to be made of metals and fiberglass, workman qualified to maintain hand-carved and painted carousels became hard to find. For financial reasons, amusement parks began to repaint and repair their own carousel figures, often using just two or three colors and adding bolts, nails, and screws to make hasty repairs. The carousel animals at Glen Echo had up to 10 layers of paint over the original vibrant factory layer.

Restoring and refurbishing the carousel and its animals after years of alterations was a slow, painstaking process. Just one animal took 150 to 200 hours of intensive effort to restore. Rosa Ragan of Raleigh, North Carolina, a specialist in carousel and carousel animal restoration, has worked on the animals and other sections of the carousel since 1983.



Restorer Rosa Ragan exposes a window of the original 1921 finish which will guide the restoration process.

Ragan began with meticulous detective work, cleaning away small, 2” x 4” portions of the surface until she found the original paint layer. She would create 40 - 50 of these sample areas over each animal, first softening the paint with a hair dryer or a heat gun then using a small scalpel to scrape away the layers. As she progressed, she carefully documented what she saw with notes, drawings and photographs. From these “windows” she could plot the colors/design and reconstruct the animal’s initial appearance. Ragan next removed the paint from the entire animal until she reached the first stable layer. She then prepared the surface by coating, filling, sanding, and smoothing until it was ready to accept a new finish. Then she applied the paint, matched to the original brilliant hues, and added up to five coats of varnish to protect the animal from the wear and tear of use. Today all of the carousel’s 52 animals and other features have been restored.

The same public spirit of stewardship that kept the carousel at Glen Echo Park helped restore it to its original beauty. The costly process of maintaining the carousel continues through the support of park visitors and through a partnership with Montgomery County called Glen Echo Park Partnership for Arts and Culture. Tax deductible donations and a portion of ticket revenues go into a special Carousel Restoration Fund. The Dentzel Carousel is an irreplaceable example of a vanished craft, an enjoyable experience for people of all ages, and a cherished community landmark.